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ABSTRACT

Extension educators teach the same information to disadvantaged youth and their families as to any other audience, and those being helped are just as willing to learn. The difference is that families with limited resources have many barriers that slow the process of change to self-sufficiency. As extension educators plan and implement programs, they must keep in mind such barriers as single parenting, health issues, safety issues, limited education, limited income, and societal prejudices. The following are ideas for program planning: placing adults from the targeted audience on the steering committee; using practical examples when teaching; avoiding a lot of handouts; using short, take-home lists to reinforce ideas; including community resources; designing brief, easy-to-read evaluation materials; building flexibility into the program; and being ready to change material that has been field tested. Program presentation ideas are as follows: be prompt; encourage participation; understand that educator attitude will establish credibility; dress appropriately; allow time for discussion and mutual support; avoid allowing group members to disclose too much personal information in a group situation; do not be discouraged if attendance is inconsistent; avoid using middle income examples to teach concepts; avoid judging; provide follow-up resources; do not expect major growth in behavior; be aware of single parenting issues; and know what one cannot do. (Contains 14 references.) (YLB)

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BUILDING COMMUNITY-BASED COALITIONS

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SYSTEM

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ENCOURAGING THE DISCOURAGED

Working With Disadvantaged Youth And Their Families

Working with people who help families in inner-city neighborhoods or rural communities offers many new challenges for Extension professionals. The family life skills, youth development, and consumer economics information being taught is the same as it is for any other audience. Those being helped are just as willing to learn and are just as caring as our traditional audiences. The difference is, however, that families with limited resources have many barriers which can slow the process of change to self-sufficiency. As programming is being planned and implemented, it is important for Extension educators to keep in mind barriers such as single parenting, health issues, safety issues, limited education, limited income, and societal prejudices which may affect the outcome of the program.

IDEAS FOR PROGRAM PLANNING

1. Include adults from the targeted audience as steering committee members when developing new materials and program plans. Your steering committee may need to meet at sites convenient to their targeted population.

2. When teaching, use practical examples that illustrate the concept being taught.

3. Avoid a lot of handouts. They will only become another barrier. Some clients have difficulty reading the handouts. Many do not have the time.

4. Use short, take-home lists to reinforce ideas, something that can be attached to a refrigerator.

5. Include resources such as: outside agencies, Extension programs and staff, community people, and any other people who can support the material being taught. Remember that many of your clients do not have a strong support system already available to them. Once Extension moves out of the neighborhood, they will need these resources.

6. Design evaluation materials that are brief and easy to read. Leave space for clients' suggestions.

7. Build flexibility into the program. Many times, group members can add new, significant information to the discussion. Their information can be very helpful to fellow participants.

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8. Be ready to change the material after it has been tested in the field. While similar material related to family and youth development may be useful to all, application of learned information may be different. Teen mothers may not benefit from discussion as much as they would from hands-on practice. Single mothers may want to relieve stress by discussing different discipline problems, while fathers may just want information. Adjust your program to meet the needs of the audience.

IDEAS FOR PROGRAM PRESENTATIONS

1. Be prompt. Families struggling with poverty issues wait for everything. You may have to wait for stragglers "conditioned" by the system, but you can use the extra time to get to know the individuals in your audience.

2. Encourage participation. Let clients know they probably have information to enhance your programming. While you may not agree with everything that is shared, you can acknowledge the strong points shared by a participant.

3. Understand that your attitude, rather than your clothes or the kind of car you drive, will establish your credibility. Be sincere. If you do not have the solution to a given problem, admit it and ask for the groups' help to work on it.

4. Dress appropriately, but do not patronize through dressing out of character. Clients often view the educator as a role model.

5. Allow time for discussion and mutual support; the material covered will be processed more fully.

6. Avoid allowing group members to disclose too much personal information in a group situation. They may regret the disclosures later and may not return to the next meeting.

7. If attendance is inconsistent, do not be discouraged. Families struggling with barriers related to poverty face numerous unpredictable problems on a regular basis.

8. Results take time. Clients may not integrate your information into their lives immediately. Many times there are other challenges with which they are currently dealing.

9. If a client brings up an inappropriate issue during your presentation, acknowledge the issue but ask the client to save the problem until after your program. Remember to meet with the client after the program.

10. When helping families with limited income, avoid using middle income examples to teach concepts. It can be annoying and frustrating. Be aware of appropriate examples that relate to your targeted audience.

11. Avoid judging. Phrases like "you shouldn't" or "that's wrong" are discouraging. If a client offers information you feel is inappropriate, try to find something helpful in their suggestion and reinforce that point.

12. Give clients follow-up resources such as a simple list of pointers, appropriate support agencies, or helpful community people. Many of your clients are beginning a new life style, moving from one (sometimes inappropriate) support system toward establishing new connections.

13. Do not expect major growth in behavior in your evaluations. Families living in poverty situations will come to your workshop in various frames of mind. One person might be worried about a sick child, another may have just lost a job on which he/she was counting.

14. Be aware of single parenting issues. Statistics tell us many families living with limited resources are one-parent homes. Family relationships, inappropriate behavior of the noncustodial parent, and boyfriend/girlfriend situations are common issues that arise as single parents begin to attempt to become independent.

15. Know what you cannot do. As an educator, you will be sharing information and resources. You will be using your best educational strategies to enable families to problem solve appropriately. Be careful not to become a counselor by taking on personal issues of clients that would be better served by trained clinical professionals. If you find yourself talking to a client at risk, alert the supervisor at that agency to this situation, or refer the client to the agency who can appropriately service him/her.

Suggested Reading

Books

The State of the Poor in the '80s. Mary Jo Bane. Copy 1984. Auburn House Publishing. Kennedy School of Government, Institute of Politics.

Employment and Economic Problems. Catherine Chilman, Fred Cox, and Elam Nunnally. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1988.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Paulo Friere. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1989.

The Quiet Revolution. Sarah Harris and Robert Allen. Signet Publications, 1978.

Class and Conformity. A Study of Values, 2nd Edition, Melvin L. Kohn. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The Poverty Establishment. Pamela Roby. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1974.

The Truly Disadvantaged. William Julius Wilson. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Articles

"A Generation in Jeopardy: America's Hidden Family Policy." Urie Bronfenbrenner. Testimony in Washington, DC. July 23, 1986.

"The Rise of Poverty in Rural America; Population Trends and Public Policy." William O'Hare. No. 15, Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, DC. July, 1988.

"Overcoming Family Poverty in America." Paula W. Dail, Ph.D. Testimony before the House Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 100th Congress of the United States. Virginia Polytechnic Institute. September 22, 1988.

"The Influence of Social Class on Socialization." Theories About the Family, Volume 1. Research Based Theories. Viktor Gecas. Burr, Wesley, Reuben Hill, F. Ivan Nye and Ida Reiss, Eds. New York: The Free Press, 1979.

"Empowering Families: Implications of the Building Family Strengths Model" for Home Economists. Mona Johnston. Western Illinois University. 1988 (paper).

"Resilient Children." Michael Rutter. Psychology Today 3/1984.

"Godkin Lecture 1988." James Julius Wilson. Harvard University, April 27, 1988.

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